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## ON THE ABUSES OF THE NOTION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS.\*

IN former centuries philosophy was primarily inspired by mathematics and the natural sciences. To-day it takes its inspiration from psychology, and this changed point of view has led to a singular diminution in the part played by reason which was formerly declared all-powerful.

In the eyes of most modern psychologists reason, once so exalted, becomes nothing more than a flimsy pattern thrown upon the living substance which instinct has woven; or rather, the conscious self with which we relate it almost vanishes by the light of pathology or resolves itself into an unconscious activity which plays such an important part even in normal life.

In fact we have here two subjects, instinct and the unconscious, which remain distinct, however allied they may be. We shall still have to distinguish both of them, in so far as they are psychological subjects, from the philosophical doctrines in which they find their completion; and first of all we must discuss the value of their application to all the sciences of man, both theoretically and practically.

The psychological subject of instinct as far as man is concerned applies to those profound depths of our nature designated indifferently by the vague words tendencies, appetites, desires or elementary feelings. The unconscious

\* Translated from the French by Lydia G. Robinson.

is concerned rather with the hidden organization of our mental life, the entire portion of that life which actually escapes our view and which like instinct seems anterior and, so to speak, exterior to our voluntary and reflective activity which nevertheless contributes to give it form.

For the same reason it is possible that the phenomena we call unconscious may furnish us with the secret of instinct which seems to fill so wide a field. But this is not the point we are to consider. What interests us at present is to observe the different range of these two subjects according to the regulations by which they are adjusted and the deductions to be drawn from them.

In the theory<sup>1</sup> that the subconscious, or the unconscious, plays an essential part in our life; that every psychical phenomenon requires at the same time both a perceiving subject and a perceived object; that it would therefore be vain to speak of a subject, of an ego that is purely psychical; and that therefore no "pure thought" could exist, I have nothing to criticize nor do I avoid accepting it. The fact practically remains that "thought" is a peculiar aspect of the "phenomenon," that it is a real fact, a fact of primary importance, and that we can not eliminate it from our investigations without running the risk of perverting them entirely.

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This however, according to Michel Bréal,<sup>2</sup> one of our principal leaders, is the error of those linguists who under the standard of the unconscious have carried the idea of fatality into the study of linguistic phenomena. He never ceases protesting against a theory which seems to him to put philology on a wrong basis. Yet, contrary to the views of the opposing school, there is at least a half-conscious intention, a secret and yet attentive intelligence, presiding

<sup>1</sup> Recently formulated by G. L. Duprat in the *Revue philosophique*, Sept. 1910.

<sup>2</sup> *Essai de sémantique* (Paris, Hachette).

over the formation of languages. This is shown in the creation of the passive form, of the adverb, of nouns, which the people have created, he says, "as the scholar creates his own language." Even phonetics seems to him to be subject to this supposed fatality which is declared to be the law of language but which he thinks is everywhere disappearing. Here again, he writes, it is the brain as well as the larynx which is the cause of the changes. "Thought is present everywhere."

From another point of view Victor Henry<sup>3</sup> writes that even if language is a conscious fact, the "processes" of language are unconscious. But might there not be degrees of distinction between the voluntary, deliberate act, and the purely instinctive or accidental one? Would not individual invention, however understood, have some part here? The simple imitative repetition of a word, of a phrase, such as we may hear at every step from children in the streets, absolutely and in every case declares a choice, an individual fancy. Even to-day we may still observe the invention of metaphors, images which "produced in some well-constructed head are common property as soon as they are spread abroad." And new compound and abbreviated words are constantly coined "when the originality of each nation has free play."

Some say that language has no liberty because I am not free to change the meaning of the words. Michel Bréal replies that this particular limitation of liberty must be correctly understood; that it is the same in kind as that possessed by the laws which regulate our social life.

To speak here of natural law only creates confusion. It would be more correct to speak of "intellectual laws."

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If the part of individual initiative is to be retained, however weakly, in the formation of matter (to which the

<sup>3</sup> *Antinomies linguistiques* (Paris, Alcan).

term "collective creation" would better apply) it is much more reasonable that it should exist in the personal inventions of the human race in all the forms in which it is manifested. An eminent geometrician, Henri Poincaré, has pleaded that we should leave some part, in mathematical invention at least, to reason, to the self-conscious intellect. Here too I have supported his contention.<sup>4</sup> With him I have shown that every sudden illumination of the mind, though it may seem unconscious, is nevertheless prepared, supported and surrounded by an act of will.

I shall not repeat what I have said before but shall add just one word on inspiration, or rather on the circumstances of inspiration in art.

"It seems to me," a woman of the world said one day to Reyer, "when I read a certain page of your 'Sigurd' that I see you seated on the shore of the sea gazing into the blue depths of the waves...." "That page?" interrupted the author, "it came to me while seated on top of an omnibus smoking my pipe."

There are many instances of this kind which might be cited. They certainly testify against the idea of blind inspiration rather than support it. If genius came only unconsciously the nerves of the musician would doubtless respond to the direct stimulation of the picture which he sees or the experience he has lived. They would be like the chord of a harp vibrating at a breath of wind. But this is not the case. A strain comes to the musician because he is expecting it, if not because he has prepared it in advance. And for this reason it comes to him at any moment whatever, sometimes even when he is performing the most ordinary action of everyday life.

"I can not draw the moon," wrote Berlioz to Wagner, "except when I am looking at its reflection in the bottom of a well." By this he meant that an act of thought must

<sup>4</sup> *The Monist*, Oct. 1910.

always intervene between the emotion of the scene and its reproduction in art.

Whoever has produced any work great or little, whether a musician, painter or poet, cannot but observe that his successful inspirations which come as if by chance are particularly frequent during the execution of the work and relate almost entirely to details. Again they are often the result of a fertile enthusiasm and become grafted upon the dominant deliberate conception.

The rôle played by the unconscious remains on the whole a very important one, but it is not well to let it blind our eyes to the value of voluntary effort, nor should the study of the secret nervous currents by which our brain is nourished and consumed prevent us from seeing the point of the machine at which the spark is going to flash.

It is said that we find only what we are looking for. This is no less true of the artist in composing an original work than of the scientist in making experiments.

I willingly grant that every sort of introspection is dangerous. Nevertheless let us be sincere. The direct bearing of physiology on the delicate problems of psychology is much too slight to render so soon useless the observation most prudent in itself and every recourse to simple argument.

Will the psychology of the unconscious therefore be more easy and more advanced than that of the conscious? On the other hand we have no better evidence of the collective entity than of the individual unity.

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Indeed I can not separate these two questions of the unconscious and the individual, and I find them again in a hardly different form in our "philosophies of history."

The opposite sides taken by the theorists may be reduced in my opinion to a question of perspective. Viewed in large outlines history appears to be subject to chance

or fate. Considered in details it shows the design and intelligent will of man. The consideration of the masses may lead equally either to eliminate the element of chance or to exaggerate the part played by accident. It is a different matter when we examine at close range a definite succession of historical events. But revolutions depend on the conjunction of several series of facts whose progress exceeds the short term of one human life, and the intelligence of men may prove powerless to govern them with security at the time, though this does not prevent its operation to a notable degree.

As in the case of the individual each nation finds itself involved in a long succession of events, and it has direct control over only one part of the events which make up the series. Here its power is real, but the efficacy of this power is in proportion to the range of its foresight and its actions. From this I would infer in passing that the best kind of government is that which with a wide comprehension of social changes assures as far as possible to a people the continuity of its political action.

But we will leave these considerations which are aside from our subject and will point out an error in sociological theory which seems to me to have attracted one of our most distinguished writers on art, Charles Lalo, of whom I have had previous occasion to speak to our readers.<sup>5</sup>

According to Durkheim<sup>6</sup> the two essential characteristics of the social fact are that it exists outside of individuals and that it is obligatory. "A social fact," he writes, "may be recognized by the power of external compulsion which it exerts or is capable of exerting on individuals." I shall not discuss this theory. However solid it may be, and if it met with no objections, its application in my opinion would not be extended without reservation to all social

<sup>5</sup> *The Monist*, October, 1910.

<sup>6</sup> *Règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris, Alcan).

phenomena and especially to esthetic phenomena of which I wish solely to speak at present.

Referring to this definition of the social fact as "constraint," Lalo<sup>7</sup> in his turn was led to define the value of art as dependent upon the approval of our peers, to reduce esthetic pleasure to "a very special delight born of satisfaction in technical requirements as determined and organized by society," and therefore to subordinate in this way the original activity of the artist to the taste of the community—by which the evolution of art, it seems to me, would not be easily explained.

In the system of Lalo, it is true, this evolution is to be brought about by way of an "internal dialectic," that is to say, a necessary development of technique by virtue of the principles on which it is based and under the influence of material inventions capable of rejuvenating it. Still it is doubtful whether this dialectic would have for its indispensable agents individuals, the innovators of genius; and it seems to me that changes in art whether in music or the plastic arts depend in the first place on the creations of the masters, the models offered by them which finally become the rule of a school.

The work of art which I have created possesses a value to me before it is recognized by the public. This may be, if you please, the value of the gold coin or silver before the state has stamped upon it the imprint which makes it a piece of money.

There is always a conflict and at the same time an exchange between the individual and society; the collective action of the community resolves itself into particular actions. Almost the same thing occurs here of which we have spoken with regard to language. Just as the individual does not have the power to change the meaning of

<sup>7</sup> I have studied his theory at length in an article in the *Revue philosophique*, October, 1909, under the title of "Esthetics and Sociology."

words because then he would no longer be comprehended,—which has not prevented strange innovations of the so-called symbolist poets—so the activity of the musician or painter is subject to certain conditions which serve as limitations for him. But still the boundary remains wide enough for his fancy as the many *salons* of our large cities testify.

What we call the taste of the community is constantly changing. Society is not a homogeneous mass; it usually consists of many groups more or less restricted and defined so that there is a tendency towards what the life of art collects by individual efforts which finally radiate in all directions whence this double movement of depression and elevation, if I may call it so, of the esthetic wave which causes now the individual aspect and now the general or popular aspect of artistic production to appear.

The interesting observation has been made that languages belonging to large populations become changed less quickly than dialects. It is the nature of the latter to subdivide more and more as in mountainous countries, because the proportion of individual strength compared to the strength of the community is greater in small districts. For the same reason schools of art have likewise been more diverse in countries divided up as Italy was. The social scale effectively reduces the originality of the individual externally by means of the conditions that it imposes upon him, at the same time reducing it internally as well by organizing its unconscious activity against him, so to speak. It is in this way that the sociological doctrine of constraint follows or confirms the psychological doctrine of the unconscious, and that the excesses of the one at the same time call forth the excesses of the other.

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At first glance we would seem to have here a contradiction between these theories and the individualistic tenen-

cies so criticized to-day. Nevertheless the theories like these tendencies are closely connected with one another. Men are inclined to humiliate reason in favor of instinct, to subordinate clear intelligence to some sort of obscure intelligence, and at the same time it is this obscure intelligence, this mysterious will of the instinct which would justify the revolts of the individual against the objectionable yoke of social laws.

Since our instincts know much more than our reason it only remains to follow them and the impulse of our appetites will lead us more surely than reason ever could.

What for instance do we find at the bottom of the modern "feminist" movement if not the rebellion of desires against the requirements of domestic duties? Our theaters are exhibiting a new ethics of love; may it not be a return to the immodesty of former times?

Certainly there is no lack of direct causes to account for this impulse of individualism with its extreme consequences, the dissolution of morals, the ruin of the family, the relaxation of all social bonds. We might refer to the rapid changes in economical and material conditions of modern life, but it is curious to note the sort of parallel progress which makes our most popular philosophies act in the same way as these external conditions simply by virtue of their principles from which they themselves do not directly draw the application.

Under whatever name we classify these philosophies they clearly proclaim themselves anti-intellectualists and, if I may be allowed the word, instinctivists. The unconscious and instinct are closely connected, because of the character common to both of restraining the power of reason and consequently of restricting the ground of practical liberty. Thus the way opens to a new fatalism, a fatalism "from within" which popular logic is no less able accurately

to deduce from the given premises than is the critical scholar.

Moreover, these comparisons are in no wise directed to condemning wholesale the philosophies under discussion. I do not in the least underrate the value of the ingenious and delicate analyses which they furnish us under the pen of a William James or a Bergson, nor do I censure the mysticism to which they are accused of tending. Human thought protects all its rights, even the right of renouncing itself and the truth is not so easily grasped that we shall ever be able to feel assured against uncertainty or against error.

Various criticisms have pointed out two especially serious dangers in pragmatism, namely, moral materialism and the tendency to anarchy. The lamented William James was hardly able to defend himself from the first accusation; it is enough to restore to our nature the noble altruistic or ideal tendencies which are no less essential to it than the selfish ones. It would be still more difficult for the pragmatists to defend themselves from the second charge which is that of submitting truth to the fluctuations of "personal" experience. The experience of the individual would not acquire the right to raise itself against the social experience were it not for the superior value attributed to instinct, to sentiment; and it would not be able to become associated with it again except by ceasing to depend on pure instinct in order to become conscious effort in the direction of the convergence of minds.<sup>8</sup> The ambiguity of this situation therefore would still result from the current abuse of the notion of the unconscious, of the excessive value attributed to unconsciousness and vague instincts over self-conscious reason.

<sup>8</sup> See in the *Revue philosophique*, January 1911, the article "L'idée de vérité" by André Laland, who knows all that can be known of modern pragmatism and has made a careful study of it. Likewise the articles of the editor in *The Monist*, collected under the title *Truth on Trial*, (Chicago, 1911).

I do not deny in the least, I repeat, the importance of the psychical phenomena comprised in the terms unconscious, subconscious or subliminal. Being inseparable from our physiological constitution they maintain an essential part in our life and assure us a considerable economy of effort in the interest of activity. But I hardly see motives strong enough to require us to exaggerate this role to the point of destroying to any extent that of intelligence itself.

Fatality in the creations of language, fatalism or pure accident in history, chance echo in the inspirations of the human race, omnipotence of instinct and individual sentiments in social life—all these are so many allied forms of one point of view which certainly is not new in the history of philosophical thought but to which modern psychology, trained as it is in the school of pathology, has come to lend a peculiar force.

Is it then so necessary constantly to contrast intelligence with sentiment? Why must we cross so deep a precipice between our instinctive and our intellectual being? Might there not be a continuity between the two and would it rather not be as wrong to say that instinct enters into reason as that reason enters into instinct?

Let us keep ourselves from extremes. To look upon these things in the noblest way let us establish even in our thought that sort of rhythm or of balance which marks action of every kind. The old ideas do not die. They are reanimated when they seem extinct, and perhaps the day is near when the intellect will be exalted anew with the same zeal with which it has been depreciated.

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